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ABSTRACT

The problems which freshmen exhibit in using the written language extend beyond difficulties with mechanics to handicaps in using words to formulate and develop concepts. A linguistic approach to teaching freshman composition involves recognizing every linguistic act as creative and a word as having a history as well as a variety of meanings. In preparing assignments and writing essays, students become well acquainted with the Oxford English Dictionary and gain analytical insights from working in small tutorial groups. (JM)

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Some Applications of Linguistic Concepts to the Teaching of Freshman Composition.

I approach the topic, "Some Applications of Linguistic Concepts to the Teaching of Freshman Composition," from the point of view of a writing teacher who has just recently become a teacher of linguistics. Although I received my Ph. D. in English and American literature in 1970, I returned last summer to the University of Pennsylvania, this time to the department of linguistics, to prepare to teach a course in Linguistics and Language History at Beaver College in Glenside, Pa. This course is required for all undergraduates working for certification as high school teachers. Graduate students who teach English on the secondary level or language arts in elementary school frequently elect the course. Personally, I look upon the chance to teach Linguistics and Language History as an opportunity to do something practical about the inadequate preparation of most of the college freshmen who have entered my writing courses for the last five years.

Not only at Beaver but at Haverford College and at the University of Pennsylvania, I have discovered that first-year college students, even bright ones, exhibit a distressing inability to control and to manipulate the English language, particularly the written language. The problem goes seriously beyond spelling and the placement of commas to handicaps of various degrees in using the written word to formulate and to develop concepts.

I think that students use language inadequately basically because of erroneous attitudes about language and insufficient understanding of linguistic resources. You can see that my definition of linguistics is broad. In this discussion I do not intend to impose any one linguistic theory on the teaching

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of composition. Instead, I would like to share with you this morning the first fruits of my renewed systematic study of linguistics as this study applies to my teaching of freshman composition.

First of all, I agree with Robbins Burling, the anthropologist among English teachers in the October 1974 issue of College Composition and Communication, when Prof. Burling says:

> Neither an abstract classification of sentence types along traditional lines nor the jargon of modern linguistics has any bearing upon the skills a writer needs. (p. 239).

I, for one, plan to confine my tagmemes to my Linguistic class, since that terminology has no function in a freshman composition class, although precise terminology is important to the scientific description of language. What I hope to convey to my freshmen, however, is the concept that language can be approached scientifically, i. e., without dogmatism and rigidity. As far as terminology is concerned, I do want to differentiate for my freshmen between the way that linguists use the words grammar and usage. I think that it is useful for freshmen who are struck with terror by the weekly necessity to submit writing samples to the fiendish gaze of an English teacher to know that, as far as linguists are concerned, people should "watch their grammar" only if they plan to write a new description of the English language system. (I think that some students gaze at that papery whiteness as I would examine an icy hill that I had to drive down without snow tires, while a traffic cop whistled at every skid.)

On the other hand, an ability to use a variety of grammatical structures — and to name the structures they are using — will make students more confident writers. I also encourage students to consult their handbooks and me for guidance

in standard English language usage — sometimes commonly referred to as "grammar" — just as they might consult Charles Goren for help in playing bridge. Playing bridge well can be a socially useful tool, just as conforming on appropriate occasions to standard English usage can be more than useful — essential, in fact — to accomplish one's purpose as a writer or speaker. I wholeheartedly adopt Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner's pragmatic definition of good English in their useful book, Linguistics: A Revolution in Teaching: "Good English," they write, "is that which most effectively accomplishes the purposes of the speaker" (p. 94). With that definition in mind, only students with a need to fail as overwhelming as that of Richard M. Nixon would insist without compromise on the right to their own language when they are being interviewed for a management-level job at IBM.

But in general terms, I agree with the CCCC policy statement on "Students' Right to their Own Language," as far as speech is concerned. My primary interest is in teaching a specialized skill — the production of edited written English. I believe that this specialized skill can be taught and learned by speakers of any dialect — to paraphrase a CCCC statement, from that of Senator Sam Ervin to that of Senator Edward Kennedy, from that of Ernest Hemingway to that of William Faulkner,

Postman and Weingartner have been very helpful generally in stimulating my thinking about the application of linguistic concepts to the teaching of freshman composition. They write:

> The problem of instruction, as John Dewey insisted, is to provide students with something to do that will engage their imaginations and heighten their capacity to conduct inquiries.

To provide a pragmatic focus for our discussion, I would like to look now first at a particular composition assignment that was inspired by my work

in linguistics and then at a freshman composition written on the assignment at Beaver College. We will then eavesdrop via the tape-recorder on a small-group discussion — a tutorial — on the composition in question.

I want to examine how my background in linguistics can help me to suggest to student-writers "something to do" that will not only engage their imagination and heighten their capacity to conduct inquiries, but will also improve the clarity and energy of their writing. By implication, I will also suggest ways that a study of linguistics provides "something to do" for teachers and student-teachers who elect such a course. Thus, I hope to go part-way toward that elusive goal of our profession: a healthy symbiosis between scholarly interests and teaching necessities.

(See assignment attached.)

In the first place, the assigned topic reflects my conviction that students will learn to be in control of their use of language only when they understand more about the nature of language. I find that students who expect to be bored by freshman comp perk up a bit when I suggest that every linguistic act is essentially creative, that every time they speak or write they are probably formulating a sentence or two that has never before existed in the world. (And some, perhaps, that the world would be better off without and will willingly let die.) But every sentence, good or bad, is a creative act. Ah, here's something almost as good as that high school "creative writing course," where students could write about outlandish subject matter in the name of being original, exercising the fancy — in Coleridge's sense — if not the imagination. Seeing each sentence as a creative act helps me to convince the students that all effective writing is creative writing.

So first of all a little elementary onomastics and language history. "Literacy is the power to name the world through the word," writes Paulo Freire, as quoted by Florence Howe in her article, "Literacy and Literature" (PMLA, May 1974, p. 438). As a teacher of literacy, I believe that students first need to

appreciate the power of words. On the first day of class I ask students next time to bring a word to class (if not to lunch.) At the next session I ask each student to say his word in a way that shows that he likes it. The students accept this request with good spirits. In fact, they seem to enjoy this procedure. Perhaps, they even begin to sense the resonance of individual words.

In preparation for the part of the assignment that requires research in the OED, I explain how to read entries in those volumes. I use this opportunity to show the varieties of spellings that have been accepted for a particular word. We talk in this context about the arbitrary nature of standardized spelling. I try to make it clear that trouble with spelling in no way indicates lack of intelligence or lack of verbal facility, since many published writers — Scott Fitzgerald, among the most prominent — have depended on their editors to standardize notoriously variant spellings. But we also discuss methods to learn standard spelling or at least to learn tricks of proofreading because many readers are unduly influenced by the appearance of unusual spellings. Even college teachers, who should know better, sometimes assume that the writer of a poorly spelled paper is illiterate. Why should the reader-writer relationship begin with a breakdown in communication?

Frequently this discussion of audience response to spelling leads to a general discussion of the necessity to define an audience before we can write anything — from a diary entry to a letter to a book. (Father Ong's article in the January 1975 PMLA articulates the concept of audience in a stimulating way.) We then suggest attributes of the hypothetical audience for the paper they are preparing to write.

Essential to the writing of that paper is an understanding of the relationship, not only of writer and audience, but of the basic linguistic relationship between word and thing. Sometimes at this point we discuss

William Carlos Williams' poem, "The Red Wheelbarrow":

> So much depends
> upon
>
> A red wheel
> barrow
>
> Glazed with rain
> water
>
> beside the white
> chickens.

I ask them to tell me what they see when they read the poem. After getting various descriptions of glossy, fire-engine-red, one-wheeled conveyances beside feathery white fowls, I direct their attention to the fact that on the page we see only ink on paper. So much — everything — depends on our ability to see that red wheelbarrow when we see those squiggles on the page.

The ability to relate concept to word is particularly remarkable because of the varieties of meanings a single word can convey. As long as we look at the significations and quotations on our sample OED entry, we talk about the life of a word in terms designed to deny the view of language as a mechanism. Learning to understand the wonders of the OED helps students, in Donald Hall's phrase, to get "inside" words. (Writing Well, p. 25).

George Watson writes in the Times Literary Supplement for Feb. 14, 1975, in an article entitled, "Chomsky: What Has It to Do with Literature?":

> a word, admittedly, is not its derivation. But it bears within it some recollection of its origins, much as men and women do. It exists diachronically, so to speak, and not just from moment to moment; and it is understood as a friend is understood, partly in light of its origins.

It makes sense to me to begin a freshman composition course with an introduction to the OED, a scholarly tool that can put the students at ease with words through

a familiarity with etymology and language history.

From our close look at the history of one word grows a need to explain in broad terms the most important facts in the outer history of the English language. Thus, we spend some class time on explaining morphological changes by reference to events like the Norman Conquest. (I am amazed every semester at students' lack of information about even so monumental an event in English language history.) Thus, in the section of the assignment where I ask the students to relate linguistic change to cultural change, I do not really fool myself into thinking that very many of them will make the leap all the way from ignorance of the Norman Conquest to an understanding of the Whorf hypothesis. But at least the students see the possibilities of linguistic leaping. Few students write with much substance on an interesting aspect of the life of a word. Nonetheless, they at least do some structured thinking about the idea that words have life.

The other part of the assignment permits the students to avoid leaping and stay as close to the familiar as their own names. This foray into elementary onomastics also helps the student to understand that the linguistic resources of naming not only makes it possible to identify ourselves and others but also makes it possible to live in a world ordered by language.

Early in the semester most of the student essays show only nascent capacity to organize the world through language. Even though I require that a rough copy be submitted with a "good" copy, the first essay submitted still shows the need for much work. To provide an opportunity for a detailed analysis of each essay, I divide the class into four-person tutorial groups. Each student in the group receives a copy of the essays written by the other members of the group. I meet with each tutorial group to spend about a half hour discussing each essay. A few days after the tutorial, each student must submit a rewritten essay.

My knowledge of linguistics helps me to guide these discussions, although we use very little linguistic terminology. I would now like to let the minds of my students be the supreme resource by playing part of an edited tape of one

such tutorial. You have mimeographed copies of the essay in question, and I will also project the essay on the screen.

In the segment of tape that you are about to hear, we discuss two basic issues, neither issue in itself very exciting. But -- to paraphrase Blake -- he who will do a student-writer good must do it in minute particulars. We talk first about a point of graphic punctuation -- the wonders of the dash used for summation. The major point that I try to guide the group to see is that punctuation -- in Edward Corbett's term -- is "an integral and often indispensable part of the expressive system of a language," not just another nuisance imposed on students by English teachers.

The second point we cover is the use of the simple present tense in English. I have found that students avoid the simple present because they don't understand its function as a tense that states general facts not specifically linked to what is happening at the given moment.

(At this point I played a portion of a taped tutorial).

When applying linguistic concepts to the teaching of freshman composition, we should let the minds of our students be our supreme resource. We should allow them to discover language as an organic system as lively as the human mind itself. Linguistics will help students to master their own language not by providing elaborate terminology but by focusing the students' attention on the inseparability of word and idea. We can use the tutorial method and other methods for close analysis of student writing. We can also analyze our reading assignments from a linguistic point of view to show the ways that professional writers use language to crystallize a concept.

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First draft of essay discussed in tutorial

Cathedral

The word cathedral has in the past and still does pertain to the major church of a diocese. The church must have a particular bishop as its head. However today the word cathedral does not produce the same vision of power and ownership in our minds as it did in the minds of those who lived hundreds of years ago.

This change is due to a value difference in present day society. Since religion and government are now completely separate the church has no legal power over an individual. It no longer accumulates land and wealth for its own benefit as once was the case.

A cathedral in the 1500's was looked upon not only as a place of beauty and worship, as it is today, but as a place of legislation and controlling power. "Cathedral's" meaning has partially changed because of a change in government which is due to a value difference of those who have lived during the past two centuries.

Cathedral (rewrite)

The word cathedral has, since the fifteenth century, referred to the major church of a diocese — the church which is the seat of the bishop. However, today the word cathedral does not produce the same vision of power and ownership in our minds as it did in the minds of those who lived hundreds of years ago.

This change is due to a value difference in present-day society. Since the separation between religion and government is now much more pronounced, the church has little or no legal power over an individual. The church no longer accumulates land and wealth for its own benefit as once was the case.

A cathedral in the 1500's was looked upon not only as a place of beauty and worship, as it is today, but as a place of legislation and controling power. Cathedral's change in meaning is interesting because it exemplifies a word which represents the same physical object that it did 500 years ago, yet the mood it evokes is entirely different. Man's language certainly does reflect his beliefs.

"In the beginning was the Word."
- Gospel of John

"The power to describe the world is the ultimate power" - Adrienne Rich

"The word, indeed, is power. It is life, substance, reality. The word lived before earth, sun, or moon came into existence."
--Margot Astrov in American Indian Prose and Poetry.

Assignments

TAKE NOTES on the following questions. We will discuss the questions on Monday, February 10. You will submit to me the notes on all the questions along with your essay on a single aspect of the assignment on Monday, February 17.

1. Select a word that you like. (Personally, I have a special affection for the words, springhouse, wiseacre, contumely, demotic, and eccentric. But you choose your own favorites.) Look up your word in the appropriate volume of the Oxford English Dictionary (OED: the edition in the Beaver library is entitled New English Dictionary.) If you cannot find your word in the OED, the word is probably a twentieth century neologism. Check the Supplement to the OED. Record the following information:

   a. What is the date of the first recorded use of this word in the English language? Make note of the earliest meaning (or meanings) of the word.
   b. How many different meanings does the word have?
   c. Record any meanings that have become obsolete (obs.),
   d. If a word has acquired a new meaning since 1700, record that meaning and an illustrative quotation.
   e. Read all quotations which are listed chronologically under each meaning to understand that context affects the sense of a word — its shade of meaning.
   f. Remember that a change in the way we use a word may reflect a value difference in English-speaking society. Jot down any ideas on this point or any other inspirations that you could develop into an essay.

2. Find out as much information as you can about the origin and history of your first and/or last name. (I realize that some of you may have special difficulties on this question. If you do, just write me a note recounting your research procedure.) I have placed the following reference texts on reserve in the library.

Loughead.	A Dictionary of Given Names.
Smith.	Dictionary of American Family Names.
Smith.	The Story of our Names.
E. G. Withycombe.	The Oxford Dictionary of English Christian Names.
Cottle.	The Penguin Dictionary of Surnames.

For Monday, February 17 write an essay (1-2 pages) on one of the following topics:

(Remember you submit notes on all the questions, one essay selected from the topics listed below, and one rough copy of that essay.)

1. Based on your discoveries in the OED, explain an interesting aspect of the life of a word.

2. Based on your discoveries about your own name, write an essay about the power of your first and/or last name to reveal or obscure your personality. If you select this assignment, you are writing about yourself in relationship to your name.